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Choosing Life or Death: A Guide for Patients, Families, and Professionals

by William J. Winslade and Judith Wilson Ross

The Free Press (Macmillan): New York, 268 pp. \$19.95, 1986

This is a readable overview of some of the major bioethical issues which trouble modern Western society. It is not a comprehensive study of all such topics, though, nor is it so intended. "We write", say the authors, "for the general reader: for the present and future patient." As indicated in the title, and as befits any ethical discourse, the matter of choice is accorded paramount place. Thus consideration of the medical, legal, ethical, and policy perspectives of each selected topic is followed by advice on decision-making or, less pompously, "choosing". Furthermore, each problem is concretized by a detailed "case study" which serves as the matrix for an extensive and specific discussion.

The topics include kidney dialysis, prolonging life, genetic screening, embryo transfer, treatment of defective neonates, and organ transplantation. There is a chapter on bone marrow transplantation ("a specialized and harrowing procedure that is still experimental") that may be too complex for the audience targeted by the writers and which, in any event, might well have been pre-empted by more pressing matters such as AIDS and abortion. The final chapter, "Essential Facts of Health Care Financing", is a brief venture into the acronymic world of DRGs, HMOs, PPOs, *et al.*, and a recognition of the crucial importance of the financial factor in the bioethical equation.

Although the writers acknowledge the assistance of a number of physicians, their book is written largely from a legal, consumer-advocate perspective. And while deploring the deterioration of the traditional patient-doctor relationship, they ironically both symbolize and widen the rift by an adversarial approach which is usually understated but never far from the surface.

Will real or potential patients benefit from reading *Choosing Life or Death*? It is hard to say. Certainly, given the human tendency to ignore the related issues of personal sickness and death, it may be too much to expect an avid readership to develop in the non-professional community. But those who *do* essay the book will undoubtedly benefit. As a practical matter, its greatest utility would be as an introductory text for a collegiate course in bioethics.

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